

CAE Reading and Use of English Part 8

You are going to read about items from science fiction that became real. For questions **1-10**, choose from the sections of the article (**A-D**). The sections may be chosen more than once.

Which science fiction work ...

- 1** had a purpose other than pure entertainment?
- 2** presented a concept that is familiar today but through a different process?
- 3** was written by an author who has more famous fictional creations?
- 4** features machines that threaten to cause the downfall of man?
- 5** shows us a device that would have enormous significance for us if it really existed?
- 6** was created by a writer whose name will never be forgotten?
- 7** was given a title that might be better understood by people today than when it was written?
- 8** revolves around a character who uses a particular device to escape from the reality of a situation?
- 9** delighted people over a period of many years?
- 10** foresaw something that is controversial today?

We've seen it all before!

Just how many of the technological advances we take for granted today were actually predicted in science fiction years ago? Karen Smith checks out four influential works.

A

R.U.R

Originally a word that appeared solely in science fiction, the term 'robot' has now become commonplace as developments in technology have allowed scientists to design ever more complex machines that can perform tasks to assist us at work or home. But how did the word originate and when? To answer this, we have to go back nearly 100 years to a play written in 1920 by a Czech playwright, Karel Capek, called *R. U. R — Rossum's Universal Robots*. The word is a derivation from the Czech *robota*, meaning 'forced labour', or *rab*, meaning 'slave'. Capek's robots are biological machines which are uncannily similar to what we today refer to as 'clones' or 'androids' but are assembled from various parts rather than being genetically 'grown.' The play eerily predicts problems that concern people today regarding machines that can think independently. Rossum's robots plan a rebellion against their creator, a man who in his own words, wants to 'play God'. The famous science fiction writer Isaac Asimov was unimpressed by the literary value of Capek's play but believed it had enormous significance because it introduced the word *robot* to the world.

B

Ralph 124C41+

If you're a science fiction aficionado, you'll definitely have heard of Hugo Gernsback. Considered by many to be the founding father of science fiction back in 1926 with the publication of his magazine *Amazing Stories*, his name has been immortalised in the annual science fiction awards, the 'Hugos'. However, the quality of his writing is questionable and his stories are more highly regarded for their content rather than plot or character development. Gernsback was deeply interested in the world of electronics and, believing that science-fiction should inspire future scientists, he filled his stories with ideas for numerous new gadgets and electronic devices. An extraordinary number of his predictions have actually come true. Today we have television, televised phone calls, sliding doors and remote controls, to name only a few, and the precursors of many of these can be found in just one novel: *Ralph 124C41+*. The mystifying title is itself a prediction of language used in text talk today: 'one to foresee for all (1+)'. Gernsback's prophetic stories included other predictions which currently remain unfulfilled, such as complete weather control, thought records and aircabs. Watch this space!

C

From the London Town of 1904

Mark Twain is a familiar name to most of us as the author of magnificent books such as *Huckleberry Finn* and *Tom Sawyer*. He is less well-known, however, for his science fiction but to avid readers of that genre, he is considered one of the best writers of all time. It is also quite possible that he predicted one of the most influential scientific inventions the world has ever seen — something that we all use and rely on every day: the Internet! It is in a little-known short story called *From the London Town of 1904* that a character invents a device called a 'telectroscope'. This is a machine that uses telephone line links across the world to enable him to see and hear what is going on in any place on the globe at a given time. How familiar does that sound? The character, while on death row for a murder that he did not commit, uses his machine to 'call up' different places in the world and the narrator of the story comments that although in a prison cell, the man is 'almost as free as the birds.'

D

Star Trek

These days mobile phones have become such an integral part of our daily lives that we would be lost without them but there was a time when we had to communicate using landlines or — horror of horrors — by writing letters! Viewers watching the birth of a new TV science fiction series in the 1960s would have been amazed at the thought that the 'communicator' used by *Star Trek*'s Captain Kirk would one day become an everyday form of communication available to us all. Kirk's 'communicator' was a small device he used to flip open and, in retrospect, it seems surprisingly similar to a mobile phone that became popular in the late 90s. The long-running series also featured several other devices that have since moved from fiction to the real world. However, the famous *Star Trek* 'Transporter', through which people can immediately materialise in different places, still remains the Holy Grail for many in the world of science. Now, that really would make a difference to our lives. 'Beam us up, Scottie,' please?

